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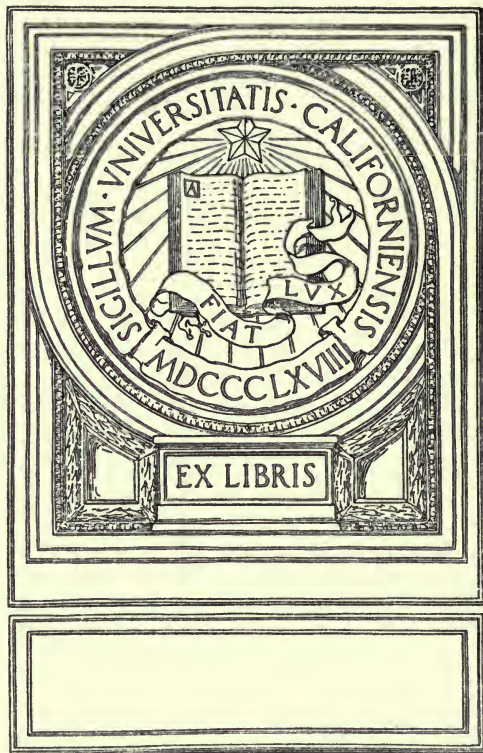
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GOETHE

BY
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WITH THE COMPLIMENTS OF

JAMES T. HATFIELD,

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ILLINOIS.

ART. IX.—GOETHE.

EMERSON, describing his visit to Wordsworth, in 1833, says: "He proceeded to abuse Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* heartily. It was full of all manner of fornication. . . . He had never gone farther than the first part; so disgusted was he that he threw the book across the room." * Wordsworth is by no means the only judge who has "never gone farther than the first part," and it is doubtful whether any great writer has ever been approached with more prejudice. In more recent years some of the blame may perhaps be laid upon the Germans themselves, who, especially since the Franco-Prussian War, have often taken on an air as though Goethe had exhausted poetry, and as though the English-speaking world must look to Germany for all literary ideals; whereas, every great literary and intellectual uplift in Germany, and by no means least in the case of Goethe himself, goes back directly to England. The depreciators of Goethe are not usually those who have come to know him at first hand, and they are responsible for much suffering from that chief of all earthly trials, the dogmatism of the uninstructed. He never condescended to charlatanism in order to attract the masses, and he made use of difficult allegory in conveying recondite truths.

We must follow Goethe historically, remembering that his youth was stormy and unclarified; we must take into account the most varied and apparently contradictory manifestations, and deduce our result from the sum total. † The purpose must be separated from the subject-matter; the works were written boldly and freely, and must be received and interpreted in the same spirit which attended their birth. Problematical natures are often delineated, as in the dramas of Shakespeare, who gives us the best key to the interpretation of our poet. Nor must we forget his own desire :

Whom do I wish for my reader? The one most candid, forgetting
Me, himself, and the world; wholly absorbed in my work. ‡

Certain it is that the mighty personality of Goethe is one of

* *Works*, v, 24.

† Comp. Harnack, *Goethe in der Epoche seiner Vollendung*, p. 201.

‡ *Vier Jahreszeiten*, No. 62.

the great possessions of our race, and not yet to be dispensed with. The more important men who have devoted themselves to German literary studies—such as Carlyle, Wilhelm Scherer, Herman Grimm, and Erich Schmidt—have been attracted irresistibly and more and more exclusively to Goethe as the central fact, just as every sincere student of art becomes more and more subject to the influence of the Greeks. While it is a most costly thing to attempt to maintain decaying relics of bygone ages, there are heritages the loss of which would sensibly impoverish mankind.

Goethe's genius is, before all, a poetic and artistic one. "It was for æsthetic ends that I was created," he said in a conversation with Friedrich von Müller.* From his works alone may be deduced a firmly grounded system of normal æsthetics. The pure beauty of his art is perennial, and

Still will keep

A bower quiet for us, and a sleep

Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing.

How immense his literary debt to England, even in the so-called "German" element of *Gemütlichkeit*, need not be discussed here. In the period of his creative maturity he is particularly the prophet of Hellenism in art and letters.† After the most varied attempts and studies his artistic theories became settled into a firm conviction that Greek art embodies the noblest simplicity and quiet greatness, and gives permanent and absolute canons of literary excellence, combining naturalness and high culture, freedom and law. He says:

Clearness of vision, cheerfulness of acceptance, easy grace of expression, are the qualities which delight us; and now, when we affirm that we find all these in the genuine Grecian works, achieved in the noblest material, the best-proportioned form, with certainty and completeness of execution, we shall always be understood if we refer to them as a basis and a standard. Let each one be a Grecian in his own way; but let him be one. ‡

A concise putting of his final creed is contained in the little poetical dedications—a feature borrowed by Emerson

* January 20, 1824.

† Michaelis, *Goethe und die Antike*, Strassburger Goethevorträge, 115 ff.

‡ Quoted by Professor Jebb in the *Atlantic Monthly*, lxxii, 552.

for his essays—prefixed to his treatise on *Art and Antiquity*, 1821 :

Homer has long been named with praise,
And Phidias in these later days.
Against the two none may contend ;
This truth no mortal should offend.

Be ye welcomed, noble strangers,
By each truly German mind :
Only in the Best and Highest
Can the soul true profit find.

This gospel of Greek art was preached with a call for enthusiasm and devotion, but with a demand for severe disciplinary preparation and slow training, as in the days of art under Pericles or the Medici. This element preserved Goethe from the unsound tendencies of the most modern "return to nature." He seeks nature where it is most healthy and beautiful ; the crying evil of the present naturalistic movement is that it chooses the vile and the unlovely as an end to its efforts, and art thereby defeats its own chief purpose. Goethe's feeling for the wholesomeness, vigor, and moderation of the Greeks protected him from sickly pessimism and brutal naturalism.

For Goethe's great service to the national literature lay chiefly in the fact that he did return to nature. He holds the mirror up in a way that only Shakespeare has surpassed, and of all natural phenomena the soul of man claims his chief interest, as is especially shown in his dramatic characters. From the *Heath-rose* and *Werther*, both created for an age that needed "heart" above all things, to the end of his life his works come forth from a full, warm feeling ; they are strong, genuine impressions, put into symmetrical form. He often emphasizes the preeminence of truth in art : "The inner content of the object to be elaborated is the beginning and end of art ;" * "I do all honor to rhyme and rhythm, but the really deep and effective, the truly formative and inspiring part of a poet's work, is that which still remains after it has been translated into prose ;" † "All talent is wasted if it be spent upon an unworthy object." ‡ Those who see in our

* *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, vii.

† *Id.*, xi.

‡ *Conversations with Eckermann*, i, 55.

artist one who sacrificed content and purpose to æsthetic beauty err grievously. "Art for art's sake" in its narrower sense had for him no meaning. With all the joyousness and grace and charm of his art, he wrought his apparently most casual work with an underlying purpose of "asserting eternal Providence and justifying the ways of God to men." He well terms his "epigrammatic" poems "the sportive embodiment of profound thought." The artistic clearness, serenity, and repose are so perfect that we can easily forget that the artist uses all these qualities as the expression of a deep intent. From the simplest love motive to the profoundest speculations in philosophy all is breathed into matchless form, symmetrical, melodious, and pure; largely on this account is it true of his works that "the human race takes charge of them that they shall not perish." The realism which sees clearly the facts of life is joined to the idealism which transmutes facts into the higher truth. Goethe's sonnet "Nature and Art" (1802) sums up definitively the poet's æsthetic theory:

Nature and art seem ofttimes to be foes,
But, ere we know it, join in making peace;
My own repugnance, too, has come to cease,*
And each an equal power attractive shows.

Let us but make an end to dull repose:
When art we serve in toil without release,
Through stated hours, absolved from vain caprice,
Nature once more within us freely glows.

All culture, as I hold, must take this course:
Unbridled spirits ever strive in vain
Perfection's radiant summit to attain.

Who seeks great ends must straitly curb his force;
In narrow bounds the master's skill shall show,
And only law true freedom can bestow.

Even Professor du Bois-Reymond, in his trenchant attack upon the influence of Goethe, † calls him "the chief lyric poet of all time." Goethe emancipated Germany from bondage to the "correct"—of which he said, "Correctness is not worth sixpence if it has nothing more to offer"—by showing the

* We have in *Werther* (Am 26. Mai) a strong expression of his youthful antipathy to rules in matters of art.

† *Goethe und kein Ende*, 1883, p. 13.

poetic value of the common, natural occurrences of life. His poems are to be referred to definite personal experiences, and come from the depths of the heart; they are the necessary outlet of suppressed emotions; individual experiences are expressed in so vigorous and effective a way that they become typical of a whole range of related psychological phenomena. He finds in the phases of nature and in the simple figures of daily life the adequate poetic interpretation of the moods of the soul. His poems, "woven from sunbeams and odors of morning," have a musical fullness and melody, a grace and breeziness, an elfin lightness and airiness, an irresistible dramatic power, or at times the sweet pathos of mournful elegiac cadence. They refresh, soothe, charm, alleviate, stimulate, and dissolve. This many-sidedness belongs, as well, to the dramatic and prose works, reflecting, as they do, the different periods of the poet's life, but each genuine and true to itself, and each at the summit of its own class, whether romantic, classic, or oriental, contemporary or mediæval. It is a tableau of human experience, subject-matter for the study of mankind. His prose style is clear and luminous, serene in its harmony, strong and uninterrupted in its flow.

Goethe was an interpreter of human life in the fullest sense. We confess to a certain charity toward those champions of Christian morals who discard Goethe altogether, because he did not at all times practically embody the principles of Christian ethics. Such a standpoint is heroic, in being willing to sacrifice any advantage rather than give up the one thing needful; but the alternative seems unnecessary, and is based, perhaps, on too narrow an interpretation of 1 Cor. ii, 2. St. Paul himself made much use of worldly learning, and had a wide knowledge of human experience which particularly fitted him to be "all things to all men;" he confessed himself "debtor both to the Greeks, and to the Barbarians," and commended "whatsoever things are true." There is danger of obscurantism in dispensing with the study of human history as a whole, a danger into which Luther sometimes fell, as when he denounced Aristotle as a "damned, insolent, treacherous heathen." The sanest truth is contained in the words of Professor Dowden :

Such an oceanic writer as Schiller or Goethe may contain within his vastness some things that belong to the rankness and garbage of the earth; but so antiseptic is his large and free vitality, played upon by the sun and breeze, so wholesome is his invigorating saltness, that we may dash fearlessly across the breakers, and quit his sands and shallows for a gleeful adventure in the deep.*

Psychological knowledge is a chief aim of Goethe-studies; he was both universal and impressionable. Applicable are his own youthful words in regard to Shakespeare: †

That which is termed evil is often another phase of good, is as necessary to its existence, and belongs as much to the whole scheme of things, as that the tropics should blaze and Lapland should freeze in order that there may be a temperate zone. He conducts us through the whole world, but we tender, inexperienced souls scream out at every strange grasshopper that jumps across our path, "O, good sir, the monster will swallow us!"

He grasped life as a whole, not in things or parts, and found everywhere in this complex drama sources of enlightenment, entertainment, and elevation. From the manifold world which he presents to us we may get that which we are fitted to appropriate; he does not give us a ready-made product. His own life was most typical of what humanity may accomplish. He founded no school, but liberated his age by giving it inward freedom through truth. Says Carlyle:

And knowest thou no Prophet, even in the vesture, environment, and dialect of this age? None to whom the Godlike had revealed itself, through all meanest and highest forms of the Common; and by him been again prophetically revealed: in whose inspired melody, even in these rag-gathering and rag-burning days, Man's Life again begins, were it but afar off, to be divine? Knowest thou none such? I know him, and name him—Goethe.‡

It must not be forgotten that Goethe was opposed to a false liberalism: "All that sets free the soul, without at the same time giving us self-mastery, is destructive."§ In his scheme of life he demanded full scope for faith and will.

Goethe is a great observer and recorder of the facts of life, rather than the dogmatic exponent of a rigid systematic

* *Transcripts and Studies*, p. 252.

† *Zum Shakespeares Tag*, 1771.

‡ *Sartor Resartus*, book iii, ch. vii.

§ Quoted by Harnack, p. 202.

philosophy. He drew wealth from all systems, but was subject to none. While there are apparent contradictions there is a consistent tendency. "I never imagine," he says, "that I have compassed the truth, but one thing I know, I am headed toward the truth." * Says Professor Münsterberg: "God and man, nature and the mind, law and freedom, science and art, religion and history, social questions and ethics, were within the range of his earnest study." Although his interest was directed more toward life and action than toward speculation, he gathered a rich store of golden fruits of knowledge of human nature, society, and thought, and a body of practical synthetic philosophy which he honors his reader by imparting with utter sincerity. Many a youth who is paralyzed by coming gradually or suddenly to perceive that he possesses only an empirical grasp upon the problem of life might have been saved this most bitter experience had Goethe been his schoolmaster. Especially in our country, where sophistry so often passes for demonstration; where tumid rhetoric is substituted for reasoning; where romantic sentimentality, emotional appeals, and crude generalizations often serve for facts; where the radical delusion so often prevails that any man can be anything he elects to be or gets others to elect him to be—there is wholesome instruction to be gained from this superbly endowed student of life; and it is significant for us that his final theoretical result so closely approaches the one to which we are also tending, namely, that the æsthetic ideal is to be postponed to the practical, that the welfare of society is not to be reached through abstract speculation but by labor and accomplishment. Goethe admitted that there were certain insoluble problems, but held that there must be a practical decision in regard to laws of conduct, and the sum of his ethics is, Do faithfully and enthusiastically your own duty to society each day. The perception of truth is not enough; it must be embodied, acted out, applied. The highest work of art is the individual life. Truth can be reached only by the most conscientious endeavor in practice, and the restless striving and yearning of the individual must be brought to a steady, purposeful activity for the good of all men, and not for oneself.

* *An Schultz*, Oct. 25, 1820.

The law of unselfish love to one's fellow-men is the cornerstone of Goethe's philosophy of life. This self-surrender and self-limitation is the release from the feverish quest after all knowledge and all enjoyment; it is the practical philosophy which Goethe preached most insistently.*

How noble is Goethe's counsel to young poets † (contrasted, for instance, with Heine's melodious wails of the spoiled child over certain forms of happiness that he has missed):

When, on entering into active, vigorous, and, at times, disagreeable life, where we must all feel that we are in fact but dependent parts of a great whole, we clamor for all the earlier dreams, wishes, hopes, and good things of our youthful fairy tales, then the Muse takes her leave and seeks the companionship of the one who cheerfully practices resignation and who easily recovers his serenity; who knows how to get some good gain from every season of the year; who concedes its advantages to the skating rink, as well as to the garden of roses; who quiets his own sorrows and looks resolutely about him to find an opportunity of alleviating another's pain or promoting another's joy.

Utterly misleading is Professor Dowden's charge that Goethe "neither taught nor practiced the surrender of one's inmost personality to something higher than the Ego," ‡ for this is precisely what the lesson of existence did teach him, and which he proclaims as the first rule for the conduct of life. § He enjoins resignation, submission, and surrender, not as leading to quietism or the extirpation of one's powers, but that one may give himself to new and better activities; not prohibition and omission for their own sake, but as clearing the way for continuous, positive action. This ideal of devoted labor and service "he taughte, and first he folwed it himselve."

As a young man he writes to his mother from Weimar, || "I have all that a man can wish, a life in which I daily exercise my powers, and daily make some growth." And in his diary of about the same time he says, ¶ "The pressure of practical duties is most excellent for the soul; when it lays

* Windelband, *Strassburger Goethevorträge*, p. 103.

† In *Kunst und Altertum*.

‡ *The Case against Goethe*, *Cosmopolis*, II, 641.

§ Comp. *Marienbad Elegy*.

|| August 9, 1779.

¶ January 13, 1779.

them aside it refreshes itself more freely, and really enjoys life." Step by step throughout his long life he strove upward in action, enthusiasm, and accomplished duty. He welcomed all that could help his growth, even harsh and bitter criticism. He was a model, self-sacrificing servant of the commonwealth. In his latest estimate Herman Grimm says of him, "He always considered his civic duties as the highest and most binding, and unreservedly put all other subjects of thought and action into a secondary place." * "Who bade Goethe superintend buildings, control the military chest, regulate public roads?" asks Professor Dowden, sneeringly. There is probably no other explanation than in the high demands of Goethe's own noble nature, comparable in this to Milton's, whose unselfishness called forth Wordsworth's tribute :

And yet thy heart
The lowliest duties on herself did lay.

His theory of the welfare of the State demanded the faithful performance of the special duty of each man, from the sovereign to the day laborer.† He had, to be sure, a mistrust of the ability of the masses to conduct personally the functions of government in a scientific way ; and there are not wanting later observers who, like Amiel, ‡ suspect that "the modern zeal for equality is a disguised hatred which tries to pass itself off as love." He demanded, however, the association of all men for the common good, and in *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre* he forecast theoretically, and with profound political sagacity, a new socialistic era in which every individual shall be educated for the service of the State.

A word as to his ethics of the sexes, a matter in which we must not be misunderstood as tolerating for a single instant loose laws of conduct. Absolute purity is the fundamental safeguard of humanity's highest interests, and laxity here is the most fatal of all destructive social errors. But let us not lose all sense of proportion or justice in dealing with the individual Goethe. Luther, in criticising the style of certain fathers of the Church, says, "The good fathers lived better

* *Das XIX Jahrhundert in Bildnissen*, II, 317.

† Harnack, p. 201.

‡ *Journal*, December 4, 1863.

than they wrote." * But it is, alas! even more true that many of the world's most cherished benefactors have written better than they lived. We do not ban all the works of Shakespeare or Burns or Solomon, or altogether repudiate the high civic services of some of the most efficient statesmen, because of their personal ethical defects; nor do we utterly execrate the memory of Milton because his theories of divorce were loose and destructive. Loquacious critics forget that the adored Schiller, who found in happy marriage with a noble woman a full solution of his moral difficulties, exhibited a vehement advocacy of beastliness in his earlier poems which finds no parallel in Goethe. The latter's Leipzig and Roman periods, especially, countenanced a destructive social order, and this fact cannot be too strongly condemned and deplored; on the other hand, no man has done more to glorify the highest bond of social order, a great pure passionate love—a love which leads to self-sacrifice and disciplinary development, a love unspeakably sacred to every man who

Remembers how his father's eyes
Once on his mother used to brood.

For this reason Goethe's teachings in regard to the relations of the sexes are, in the main, wholesome and commendable. Humanity, in its lower stages, has required much emphasis of checks and safeguards. The fire, which warms and cheers and enlivens, contains the possibilities of the most fearful disaster. No house was ever swept from its foundations by a feeble rill, but shall this be preferred to the powerful stream, able to bear along the freights of a nation? There is a distrust of the stronger human emotions, not entirely unknown in America, which impoverishes life and countenances much misery; which everlastingly preaches repression, instead of going on to perfection; which advocates the false and morbid thought that all sensuous love is sinful; and which makes one believe that there may be even a need, in some places, of reviving the doctrine of the *r  habilitation de la chair*, not in the devilish and degrading sense of "Young Germany," of Walt Whitman and Le Gallienne, but in the spirit of Martin Luther or of Goethe in *Hermann und Dorothea*, to

* *T  schreden*, iv, 373.

which work we refer critics for a German picture of normal social life.

Professor Windelband declares that no one can estimate Goethe who fails to recognize how essential an element of his character was his religious feeling.* It was this feeling which brought him into opposition to the absolute individualism of the Storm and Stress period. There had been a potent atmosphere of religious influence in Goethe's intimate surroundings from youth up. His strong friendship for such persons as Jung-Stilling, Fräulein von Klettenberg, and Lavater illustrates these tendencies. His religion settled into a conviction that man is shut in and determined by a higher, purer, unfathomable, eternal power, and that he must gladly and reverently surrender himself to its will. Prayer should chiefly be for lofty thoughts and a pure heart, and its result should be submission and gratitude. His belief in God was more directed toward the manifestations of his power in goodness, reason, and love than toward formal abstract theories as to his existence and personal nature. He believed in a deep religious reverence as the foundation of all character and usefulness. A dominating consciousness of union with God is taught by him to be indispensable for peace and successful activity. He believed in immortality as the logical continuance of the exercise of powers that had been developed by strenuous fidelity through life. "Those who have no hope of a future life," he said to Eckermann, "are already dead for this one."† His reverence for the Bible made him distinctly averse to the higher criticism. He called himself a Christian, and maintained a worshipful reverence toward Christ as the divine manifestation of the highest principle of virtue. "Let intellectual culture," he said, "advance as much as it may, it will not get beyond the loftiness and moral culture of Christianity."‡

His immense services to the intellectual life of Europe cannot be recounted here. He called German poetry into being; his diction supplied his nation with an art-implement such as it had vainly been striving to acquire since the days of the

* *Strassburger Goethevorträge*, p. 96.

† *Conversations*, I, 85.

‡ *Conversations with Müller*, April 7, 1830.

Reformation; the magic inspiration which he gave to the whole tribe of younger poets, such as Rückert, Geibel, Platen, and Heine, can never be measured. In an entirely different field he gave a great widening to the scope and method of the study of the natural sciences. Despite his unfortunate contest with Sir Isaac Newton in the field of physics, modern thought concedes that he laid for all time the foundations for the physiological and psychological study of color.* He is the transmitter of Germany's contribution to the common wealth of modern civilization, representing its "prophetic foresight, its clear-eyed perception of things as they are, its mathematical profundity, physical accuracy, philosophical elevation, keenness of intellect, mobility of poetic imagination, and harmless enjoyment of nature."† He is a colossal manifestation of creative power. Napoleon, after looking at him attentively, said, "*Vous êtes un homme*;" and it is chiefly this fact that renders Goethe worthy of the earnest study of mankind.

* Jacob Stilling, *Strassburger Goethevorträge*, 147, ff.

† Goethe, in *Farbentheorie*, *historischer Teil*.

James Taft Hatfield





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